

The Synthesizing Mind brings ideas from different places together to create new, integrated, and more sophisticated understandings. In a complex world, the skill to bridge ideas and connect diverse topics is invaluable. When children at play combine different ideas that make sense to them and their playmates, they practise synthesis. In my Junior Kindergarten example, two children begin playing as the parents who are bringing their sick baby to the doctor. As others join in, their ideas have to be incorporated or the play falls apart. The children at play are integrating various viewpoints to keep the story going.

The Creative Mind clarifies problems, uncovers and examines dilemmas and finds novel solutions. Inventing ideas to bring to their games and plans, children see themselves as creative thinkers. They solve problems relentlessly, as their play takes unexpected twists and turns. In my example, the children encounter unexpected dialogue, and relationships. What if there are two doctors who don't agree on the ailment? What if the baby has to be hospitalized? The children have to create new roles as their story unfolds.

The Respectful Mind appreciates diversity, manages the interdependence of teamwork, and accepts the impersonal nature of fairness. If the child playing the "mommy" had it in her mind that they were going to the doctor and then home, she has to be flexible and understanding when the "doctor" sends them to the hospital. The game is helping her develop sensitivity to different viewpoints as she learns how to peacefully resolve conflict.

The Ethical Mind is self-aware and appreciates responsibilities that accrue to family, work, and community – the intimate and universal, the local and global. Other children do not always respond as one might wish, yet they can all learn to play in a way that allows everybody to participate and have their ideas heard. Because play assumes an evolving scenario, children learn that if they act aggressively, or refuse to listen to others, their game will fall apart.

The Disciplined Mind masters something specific, a particular way of thinking in a specific expertise or craft. The path to excellence requires that children learn to focus and to persevere until they achieve mastery. When their play is meaningful to them, children pay attention to what they are doing. This focus, practised at play, evolves into the capacity for extended concentration, which is key to learning and achievement. The Disciplined Mind is not visible in my example but can be seen when young children begin their first science experiments. They may spend a good deal of time "playing" with the materials before they fully understand the science. They focus and repeat a process that results in the "Aha" moment they seek.

Play is real work. Because at play the child's thoughts are self-directed and wholly engaged with what he/she is doing in the present moment, play is the essential vehicle for cognitive development. The child learns to create and sustain self-directed scenarios.

Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer describes this phenomenon in her book *The Power of Mindful Learning* (1998). According to Langer, mindful learning is authentic, sustainable, and inherently meaningful because the child brings something of him/herself into the context. For example, in my Grade 8 Judaic Arts class, the students play-acted the relationship between Rabbi A.J. Heschel and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. They were asked to imagine

witnessing or participating in the famous 1965 Civil Rights March in Selma, Alabama, along with these two great men. They considered questions such as "What were you thinking as you watched the marchers go by?" and "What made you jump in and participate? What excited you? Did anything terrify you?" By putting themselves imaginatively and emotionally into the historical period, the students examined the scenario from multiple perspectives, which enriched their understanding.

In addition to fostering mindful learning, play cultivates another set of valuable skills. While role-playing "taking the baby to the doctor," the Junior Kindergarten children are in fact practising language and literacy skills. Acting out stories helps with sequencing, inference, interpretation, and analysis. These are the skills necessary for reading proficiency. In *Literacy Beginnings: Supporting Young Readers and Writers* (2007), authors McGee and Richgels write that "Communicating in spoken language and in play are very closely related to communicating in written language... Play provides a rich context for extending children's understanding about written language."

On yet another level, play highlights one of the most important elements of education: the teacher's knowledge of his/her students. Plato wrote, "You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation." Observing students at play, teachers discover the children's characteristics and talents and thereby understand their respective academic and social levels. Good educators track their students' relation to teaching benchmarks. For youngsters, these standards include who can express themselves verbally, who can express themselves non-verbally, who can sequence a story or series of events.

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I recently led a storytelling session with a Senior Kindergarten class at The Toronto Heschel School. My springboard was the Isaac Bashevis Singer story, "Why Noah Chose the Dove." The children, pretending to be the animals in the drama, had to justify to me why they should enter the Ark. While the children were play-acting, my colleague and I took notes on which children could sequence the events but not interpret them, who could think flexibly when another classmate responded in an unexpected way, and which children could express themselves using new language and vocabulary. We also watched for their conceptual integration of background knowledge, given that they had already learned the story of Noah from the Chumash. With this important knowledge, gleaned from their playtime, we planned the "next steps" in their learning.

Albert Einstein said, "When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than any talent for abstract, positive thinking." Children engage in many different kinds of fantasy, in "free play" and in "planned play." Play is an essential educational tool, and at The Toronto Heschel School, we take child's play very seriously.

